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An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

Eddie Ellis

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Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions
510 Gates Avenue, 1st Floor
Brooklyn, New York 11216

T: (718) 484-5883
E: eellis@centerfornuleadership.org
www.centerfornuleadership.org

An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

Dear Friends:

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions is a human justice policy, advocacy and training center founded, directed and staffed by academics and activists who were formerly incarcerated. It is the first and only one of its kind in the United States.

One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons. All terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. *However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them*

In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as **PEOPLE**. People currently or formerly incarcerated, **PEOPLE** on parole, **PEOPLE** recently released from prison, **PEOPLE** in prison, **PEOPLE** with criminal convictions, but **PEOPLE**.

We habitually underestimate the power of language. The bible says, “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue.*” In fact, all of the faith traditions recognize the power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the “naming ceremony” one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be. The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me, is that I begin to believe it myself “*for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.*” It follows then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly *what I can be.* I can be and am much more than an “ex-con,” or an “ex-offender,” or an “ex-felon.”

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions believes that if we can get progressive publications, organizations and individuals like you to stop using the old offensive language and simply refer to us as “**people**,” we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are. We have made our mistakes, yes, but we have also paid or are paying our debts to society.

We believe we have the right to be called by a name we choose, rather than one someone else decides to use. We think that by insisting on being called “**people**” we reaffirm our right to be recognized as human beings, not animals, inmates, prisoners or offenders.

We also firmly believe that if we cannot persuade you to refer to us, and think of us, as people, then all our other efforts at reform and change are seriously compromised.

Accordingly, please talk with your friends and colleagues about this initiative. If you agree with our approach encourage others to join us. Use positive language in your writing, speeches, publications, web sites and literature.

When you hear people using the negative language, gently and respectfully correct them and explain why such language is hurting us. Kindly circulate this letter on your various list serves.

If you disagree with this initiative, please write and tell us why at the above address or e-mail me at ellis@centerformuleadership.org. Perhaps, we have overlooked something.

Please join us in making this campaign successful. With your help we can change public opinion, one person at a time. Thank you so much.

In Solidarity and Love,

Eddie Ellis
President

4 Easy Steps To Follow

1. Be conscious of the language you use. Remember that each time you speak, you convey powerful word picture images.
2. Stop using the terms offender, felon, prisoner, inmate and convict.
3. Substitute the words PEOPLE and RETURNING CITIZENS for these other negative terms.
4. Encourage your friends, family and colleagues to use positive language in their speech, writing, publications and electronic communications.